THE JAPANESE HOKKU
Shortest Poems in the World

By STANHOPE SAMS

Truth is the narrow of

JANE AUSTEN has left
a delightful and fade-
less portrait of her-
self, and with a fine
brush "on a little bit, two
inches wide of ivory." It
is thus that nearly all the
Japanese artists work;
painting an expensively
delicate picture on a nar-
row halowence that will
bend and bendower: carving a
grim, mysterious Buddha out of a few inches of
ivory; writing a deathless poem in less than a
core of syllables.

If we examine the little picture or carving or
poem, we soon shall see that the Japanese artists
do not work on this minute scale because their
conceptions are small, but because their art is
subtle—finished and fine. They have chosen these
limitations, and their songs, at least, have come out
of her own bosom. Even the Chinese traditions,
which fetter all customs and learning in the Empire,
have here no authority. Although Chinese words
form the bulk of the language of business, of daily
intercourse among the educated, and even of prose
literature, they are outlawed in the demesne of
song. While a few of the present-day writers are
using Chinese words somewhat freely, as in the
style of a new song (new poem), there are not, it has been asserted, a dozen foreign
words in the entire range of the national poetry.
The art shall still be that of China if we remember
what an encroachment of Romance words rests upon the poetry of England and
America.

There are three extremely brief poetic forms in Japan—happi, consisting of five lines that
make thirty-one syllables, the daitoku, of four lines that make twenty-six syllables; and the
kobai, of three lines. Of these the kobai is at once the brief-
est and the most popular. It has the twofold honor of being the shortest poetic form in all
literature, and the true national poetry of its native
land. Its music, flexing as a wood-bird's melody,
is heard wherever Japanese is spoken. Its great
popularity is due, perhaps, to the case with which
the little poems are written, remembered, quoted
and applied to almost every incident or sentiment.

Every Japanese carries a sheaf of them in his
memory, each one embodying for him and for all of
his countrymen and of children to children the spirit
of some familiar and beloved scene in Nippon, the
dramas of some heroic action, the soul of some great
or heroic passion. The seventeen syllables of the
kobai have expressed in immortal verse every
emotion known to the Japanese heart, and
inspiration and every glory of the Empire. This

mere breath of song is the chosen vehicle of
expression of the greater and of lesser poets.
Emperors and nobles, statesmen and warriors,
the learned and the blitrate, and of course friends
and lovers, all have found solace or exaltation in "the
melody of this small lute." The composition of
kobai is considered a necessary accomplishment—
one of the primal and essential graces of life. If a
beautiful image or thought arises in the mind, the
Japanese strives to seize its precise spirit, its
very soul, and to imprison it in a kobai. The
lyricism is the song of Japan. Has any other poetic
form in all literature had such exalted honor?

Tennyson speaks of "jewels five words-long," but
he required many more than five words to fashion
the gem in which this beautiful phrase occurs.
Yet Basho was able to express the same idea in
two words. Tennyson's fault lies in:

Jewels five-buttons-long

That on the stretched horitzon of all time
Sparkle forever.

The immoral phrase of Basho, which is too re-
plete with meaning to be shot within the compass
of a short English sentence, is "jewels five-buttons-
long."

The meaning is that, in order to be literate, the sub-
ject-matter must be of enduring interest, and the
style must be that best suited to the age in which
it is written.

The poetess Chiyo wrote an exquisite kobai, perhaps the most familiar to foreigners of all
Japanese poems, in exactly five words:

These Little Poems Often Are Attached to Boughs Laden With Blossoms

(Dance, O Dragon-fly, in your world of the setting sun)
(Most solemnly)
(R邰e, dear of the house)
(The morning-glory has seized my well-bucket. Gift-
water)

(For Edwin Arnold, the diffuse, used forty English
words to translate these five Japanese, or eight
for one:

The morning-glory
Her leaves and bells have bound
My bucket-handle wound.
I could not break the bands
Of those soft hands.
The bucket and the well to her I left;
Give me some water, for I come bereft.

Some brief explanation of the principal charac-
teristics of Japanese poetry may help to a better
appreciation of the few poems I shall cite in the

original. There is neither

reign nor rhythm, neither

metric nor rhyme. The

kobai is read with a slight

repetitive effect, an almost

imperceptible rise on the

first and second lines, and

a decided fall on the last

line. The Japanese find

the poetry in whatever

rhythmic effect lies in a

fixed number of syllables,
in

the truthfulness and

beauty of the image or

thought, and in the exquisite choice of words—

inexhibitability of epithet and phrase. Keats wrote
him that all that was necessary for the singer to
know was that "beauty, truth, beauty." But Basho anticipated his thought, in the phrase,

"Truth is the narrow of style," by more than two
centuries.

So fine, so subtle, is the spirit of Japan, that

breath may be whetted by Japanese invention.

Each kobai must paint a single picture, make a

simple comparison or contrast, express a single

thought or sentiment, or give utterance to a solitary
cry of pain or joy or exaltation, or imprison some

hauntingly beautiful suggestion. These little poems

often are written on small hand-paper, and attached
to the boughs laden with white cherry or plum-
blossoms, or with the red autumn-leaves (momiji),
and those who come across it. The visual and

leafy and leaves may also read the poems. Like chary nature, they limit themselves to a single

bird-melody or to a single flower-bun.

Here is a simple masterpiece by the master-hand

of Basho, greatest of kobai writers and the promul-

gator of its laws.

Chimaki yu

"She wraps up rice-cakes, while with one hand she

rests the hair upon her breast."

Another famous kobai, by Yamazaki Sokan, pre-

septs to the imagination a picture that suggests

the "water-fowl" of Bryant—

Darly painted on the crimson sky,
Thy figure flaks along.

Ko sabaku

Sagi kao yuki na

"Mystic snow." (But for its voice, the horn was only a line of snow.)

The Japanese, who often call Nippon "The Land

of the Dragon-fly," have written thousands

of kobai to this beautiful insect, which they name "zawa.
I give a favorite:

Tomo no

"My yakitori no"

(Dance, 0 Dragon-fly, in your world of the setting sun)

No bird, but an invisible thing,

A voice, a mystery.

The Japanese, hearing the cuckoo's note amid the
deepest silence of the evening, has this quaint fancy:

Has no katara

Tsu no ga sabi kata
Himikutemu —

(A solitary cry! Is it possible that the moon sang? Ah

the cuckoo!) All of Wordsworth's beautiful poem, many times

longer than this tiny gem, is hold in germ in these

few syllables.

None of these themselves doubtless prefer these

kobai that present to the imagination or to the